

Immigrants want legal status

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — The cry “Si, se puede,” Spanish for “Yes, we can,” echoed from downtown Washington Oct. 9 as thousands of immigrants rallied for a legal residency program.

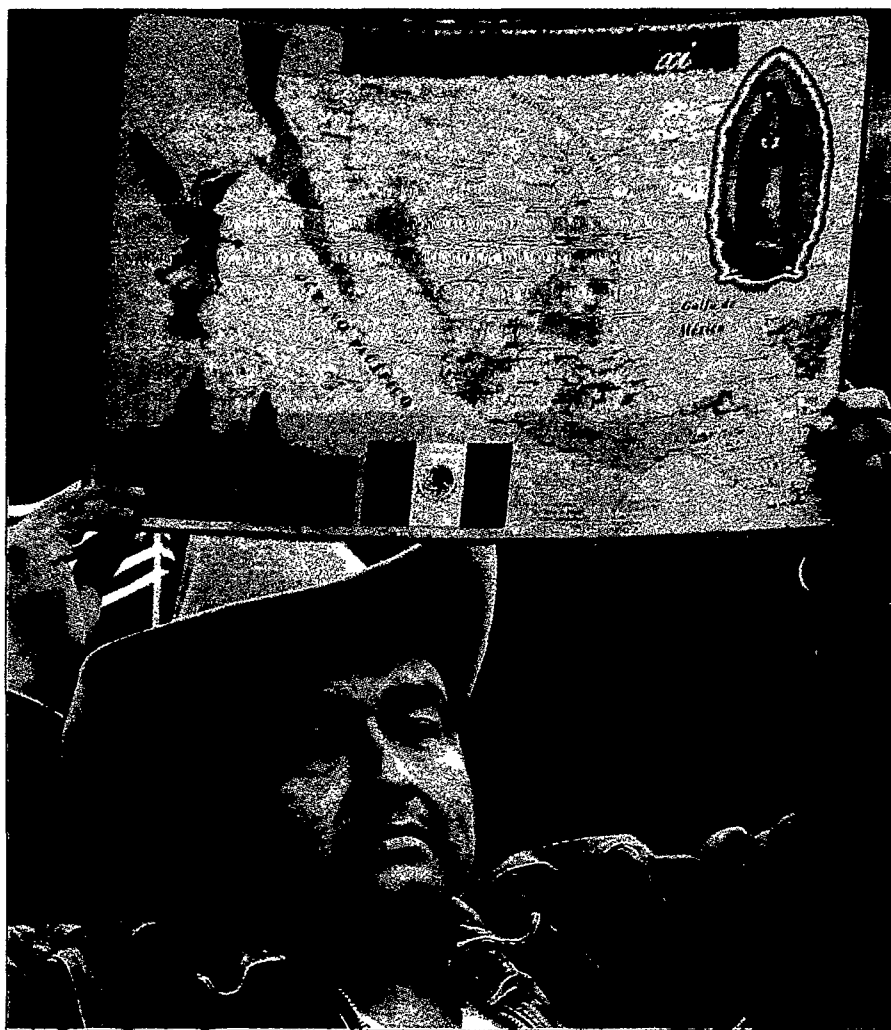
Speakers including the president of the nation’s largest labor union, the House minority leader and the chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Migration were enthusiastically answered by people from across the country who came to Washington to deliver a million postcards calling for legalizing the status of illegal immigrants already in the country.

“From the perspective of church teaching, legalization is a matter of justice,” said Miami Auxiliary Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, chairman of the bishops’ migration committee. “As pastors, we witness the moral and spiritual consequences of a system which decries the presence of the undocumented and at the same time it benefits from their hard labor.”

Speaking to the group alternately in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole and Polish, Bishop Wenski said the nation must not “acquiesce to a system which creates a permanent underclass of people, who are expected to wash our clothes, pick our food in the fields, clean our houses, take care of our children and manicure our lawns, but are not expected to fully enjoy the fruits of their labor because of their legal status.”

Farmworkers, hotel employees, clothing manufacturers and taxi drivers were among the groups represented in a crowd organized by churches, labor unions and organizations such as the Polish American Association and the Guatemalan Chamber of Commerce. The Los Angeles, Washington and San Francisco archdioceses and the dioceses of Oakland, Calif., Galveston-Houston, Cleveland and Richmond, Va., also participated.

The crowd included people carrying signs and banners from New



Bob Roller/CNS

Fedel Moreno of Silver Spring, Md., holds up a map of his home country, Mexico, during a rally for immigration reform Oct. 9 in Washington.

York, Chicago, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and California. A Franciscan priest carried one end of a banner from the Spanish Catholic Center in Washington, while next to him a Hispanic man in a union T-shirt waved a small American flag.

Flags from the United States, Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia dotted Freedom Plaza, which is a few blocks from the White House and across the street from the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center. At one end of the plaza is a statue of Polish nobleman Thaddeus Kosciuszko, who served as an engi-

neer and cavalry officer for the United States during the Revolutionary War.

Boxes filled with the million postcards calling for legalization were accepted by Rep. Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., who hosted a press conference the next day to introduce the Earned Legalization and Family Unification Act. The bill was unlikely to make any progress in the current legislative session, which had already run past the scheduled date to adjourn.

Gephardt, the minority leader, said the bill would certainly have a hard time getting to a vote, let alone being passed.

“But we are deadly serious about passing this bill,” he said. “Hard work should be rewarded with fair play.”

John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, said union members have to make it clear that the labor movement stands shoulder-to-shoulder with immigrants who seek to become legal residents.

Illegal immigrants “pay taxes and help build our communities,” Sweeney said, “we should reward them with full rights and respect.”

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Kids' Chronicle
 answers from page 13

Acts, Romans, Timothy

Titus, Corinthians

Ephesians, Philemon, Peter